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ABSTRACT

This study used weekly conversations with 25 freshmen at Boise (Idaho) State University (BSU) and analyses of students' journal entries to examine reasons for BSU freshmen leaving school during or after their freshman year. The 13 students who were successful (reenrolled in the spring and following fall semesters and maintained satisfactory grades) represented all types of students. However, for older successful students a supportive family environment appeared to be critical. For younger successful students, getting involved with campus activities, seeing the value of an education, and enjoying learning seemed to be important factors. Unsuccessful students fell into two groups: one group consisted of women with children who were trying to go to school but lacked support. The other group consisted of 18-year-olds who appeared developmentally unprepared for college. Other "at risk" students (those who reenrolled but had very poor grades) generally appeared to have to try harder to get the same grades others got with less effort. Results indicate that retention efforts must focus on meeting the diverse needs of various student groups. (DB)

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Who Stays? Who Leaves? Results From a Qualitative Freshmen Study

Research Report 98-05

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Office of Institutional Assessment
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Marcia J. Belcheir

Abstract

Who Stays? Who Leaves?
Results From A Qualitative Freshmen Study

Using data from weekly conversations with 25 new freshmen and journal entries, this study sought to answer the question of why so many BSU students leave during or after their freshman year. Based on re-enrollment and grade point averages during the fall and spring semesters, students were divided into four groups. The "Successful" group consisted of 13 students who returned for both spring 1997 and fall 1997 terms and who maintained GPAs above 2.0 for both semesters of their first year. The "Unsuccessful" group consisted of seven students who did not re-enroll and who also had GPAs below 2.0 for at least one semester. A third group of four students was labeled "At Risk" because, despite the fact that they continued to enroll, during either their fall or spring semester they had a GPA below 2.0 indicating they might be in academic jeopardy. A final group consisted of only one student who had good GPAs both semesters but did not return one year later.

Students who were successful represented the spectrum of the student body. Some came from out of town, and some were local residents. Some were just out of high school while others had finished quite awhile ago. Prior academic performance ranged from salutatorian of their class to high school drop-out. Some loved being at BSU, while others griped about everything from dorm rules to their classes.

For older successful students, a key to success seemed to be a supportive environment. Two women with children were in this group (one married, one not) along with a man in his mid-20s with a wife and child. All were strongly supported in their educational pursuits by their families. All three loved to learn and had GPAs above 3.0 both semesters. Two of the three had dropped out of school and had General Education Diplomas (GEDs), while the third had a high school GPA of under 2.5.

For younger successful students, getting involved with campus activities, seeing the value of an education, and enjoying the pursuit of learning seemed to help them be successful.

Family support for this group seemed less important than for the non-traditional students. In fact, extreme family support could at times signal that the parent, not the student, was committed to college.

Students who were *not* successful typically fell into two groups. One group consisted of women who had children and were trying to go to school with little support. The other group consisted of 18-year-olds who generally appeared developmentally unprepared for college. With one exception, every student who fell into the "unsuccessful" group already lived in the Boise area. Most were enrolled only for one semester, and a majority actually stopped attending before the end of the term.

"At risk" students were mainly those who had to try harder to get the same grades others were able to get with less effort. Three students fit this profile, while a fourth seemed to be going through the motions because of family pressure.

The one student who left despite acceptable academic progress was unhappy with the university environment and thought it was too liberally biased. His major, however, required him to transfer to the University of Idaho to complete his degree so perhaps this was the reason he left.

The study highlights the diversity in our student body and how a "one-size-fits-all" answer to retention was unlikely to succeed. Non-traditional students need support. Traditional students need academic and social links to campus and a reason to put forth the effort beyond parental pressure. It was clear, too, that retention efforts will not save students who truly don't want to be here. Though a prior quantitative study found first term GPA to be most predictive of success, this study showed that a low GPA was often indicative of students' having already left the institution so it was not an effective early warning sign.

Providing personal attention on a large impersonal campus may also help. The one-year retention rate for our small group was 68%, considerably higher than the 55-58% seen for freshmen as a whole. Perhaps the study itself improved retention by simply holding weekly conversations with new freshmen and putting a personal face on the institution.

Who Stays? Who Leaves?

Results From A Qualitative Freshmen Study

Student retention is a hot topic for many universities. Interest is often sparked by the recognition that high rates of student departure may reflect upon the survival of the institution. How to keep students in school is not only a national issue, but also is a concern at BSU. A recent survey of all BSU faculty and staff indicated that 80% thought that the university should attend to retention issues. Most faculty and staff are aware that the university has had difficulties with retention. Nationally, fall-to-fall retention figures are 73% while BSU typically retains only 55-58% of their first time freshmen students.

Many studies have been produced that purport to explain student retention. However, we cannot rely solely on what others have discovered about what keeps students successful and in school since each institution has its own unique community of students and academic and social environment. In addition, we need to look at the decision to leave college as one that includes the variety of characteristics that students bring with them to college, as well as the social and academic integration they experience at the institution. Although it would be nice to have a bag of tricks ready to toss to any student who may be at-risk for leaving the university, the truth is that students have diverse realities and retention strategies that may work for some student populations may not work for others.

Before programs to improve retention can be implemented, the institution must determine what makes students leave college or choose to complete their education. The question posed is, "Why are so many BSU students leaving during or after their freshman year, and what can be done about it?" The Qualitative Freshmen Study was designed to provide information on freshmen students to aid in retention efforts. The purpose of this study was to get to know the student experience as a whole, to allow the student to tell about their expectations of college, to learn how they personally changed during their first year of college, what things impressed them, and where stumbling blocks occurred. How college and home experiences related to decisions to continue or withdraw was also of interest.

This study complements other more quantitative retention studies at BSU (i.e., Research Report 97-03, Research Report 97-05) by supplying a micro-look at the life of a group of freshman students. The task was to determine what draws them to BSU, what things new students are confused about, where they need help, and why they drop out of college. Prior reports addressed students' initial impressions as they were admitted and registered for classes (Research report 97-04) and student classroom experiences their first semester (Research report 97-06). This report rounds out the picture by tying student experiences to student success.

The study, initiated Fall semester 1996, involved 25 students chosen to represent the entire Freshmen class in terms of gender, ethnicity, home address, age, academic preparation, and educational goals. Weekly interviews, student journals, and a group meeting offered students the opportunity to tell their story in their own words. This in-depth, long term relationship with the students allowed for gathering data not generally available by survey methods.

For purposes of this study, the 25 students were divided into four groups. The "Successful" group consisted of 13 students who returned for both spring 1997 and fall 1997 terms and who maintained a GPA above 2.0 for both semesters of their first year (fall 1996 and spring 1997). The "Unsuccessful" group consisted of seven (7) students who did not re-enroll and who also had GPAs below 2.0 for at least one semester. A third group of four (4) students was labeled "At Risk" because, despite the fact that they continued to enroll, during either their fall or spring semester they had a GPA below 2.0 indicating they might be in academic jeopardy. A final group consisted of only one student who had good GPAs both semesters but did not return in the fall of 1997.

Students who were Not Successful

The seven (7) students who fit this category generally fell into two groups. One group consisted of three women in their late 20s or early 30s with children who had too many commitments and not enough support. These three students (Cora, Shauna, Kari) were female non-traditional students who quit going to classes very early in the semester. Two of the women were working full time while going to school part time. The third, Kari, had her GED, was enrolled full time,

and was not working. She was also pregnant at the beginning of the semester, and provided no comments or interview conversations after agreeing to be a part of the study.

The high school GPAs of Cora and Shauna were 2.86 and 3.16 indicating prior academic success. However, they didn't feel comfortable with the large size of the institution, and they did not talk to their professors about their progress. Both mentioned difficulties with their English classes. Kari, with the GED, did not indicate whether she had attended any classes fall semester. Their few short weeks on campus were, overall, not a positive experience for them. They did not cultivate any friends, faculty, or cohorts for a support group.

The second group consisted of four 18-year-olds who generally appeared developmentally unprepared for college. One student (Jeff) had such difficulties in negotiating the financial aid system that his mother was going to fly in to help him. He couldn't seem to find a work-study job and had to drop a course he found too hard. He mentioned to the interviewer that he had a learning disability. He was the only student in this group who didn't live in Boise before enrolling in college. He returned in the spring but continued to perform poorly and left after that semester.

A second student (John) was working full-time, going to school full-time, and living off-campus with two roommates on his own for the first time. He indicated he thought he'd taken too much of a load and also complained about his English class and dropped it. He said his family was very supportive and were always calling to see if he was getting his work done; his co-workers also seemed supportive. However, it appeared that work was more important than school to him, and his family called a lot to remind him to do his school work. His level of readiness for college work and overall maturity may have been insufficient, which his mother suggested to the researcher during a call to the student. The need for an education may not have been evident to him, since he was already working full time, and his motivation was too low regarding the tasks that had to be done to succeed in college. Though he indicated throughout the fall term that he was doing "moderately well," he ended the term with 0 credits and did not re-enroll for spring.

Barry also was much supported by his family in his college endeavors. His father handled admissions while he was in Europe, and his grandfather paid for tuition. He lived with his father and went to his mother's house to type his papers on her computer. He indicated that he needed to learn how to be an adult. He did not enjoy classes very much, saying "all we do is sit there and take notes every day." Though he said school was his top priority and that he had ample time, at the end of the semester he thought he needed to "do better next semester with time management and take it more seriously." Though his high school GPA was 3.04, indicating prior academic success, his fall GPA was 1.75. He re-enrolled for spring but his GPA dropped further to 1.0 and he did not return for fall. This student had several emotional family events early in the semester, which he admits interfered with his concentration on studies.

The last student in this group was Karen, an 18-year-old female who was very shy and scared. She lived at home, and her family was paying for school. She came to BSU because it was close to home and her brother was here. She felt like she didn't know what she was supposed to be doing in college. She often answered interview questions with "I don't know." She indicated she had a problem doing things on her own and was afraid of driving to school and elsewhere. She would often respond to professors' questions by not answering at all or by writing her response on a piece of paper. Though her high school GPA was 3.23, her fall semester GPA was 1.90. She thought she might transfer to the College of Applied Technology but ended up just leaving after the spring term.

Students who were Successful

Over half of the students (13/25) fell into this category. And they represented the spectrum of the student body. Some came from out of town, and some were local residents. Some were just out of high school and some had finished quite awhile ago. Prior academic performance ranged from salutatorian of their class to high school drop-out. In general, however, dividing the group into the seven students who had to move to Boise to attend BSU (four from Idaho and three from out of state) and six students who were already living in the area provided the best way of grouping.

Out-of-town students

Students from outside Boise either came from small towns in Idaho (Teresa, Jake, Seth, and Rachel) or from the neighboring state of Nevada (Laura, Kate, and Perry) through the Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE). Four of the out-of-town group were living on-campus and three were living off-campus in apartments close to the university. Almost all were receiving some form of financial aid and three of the seven were working. With the exception of Rachel, who waited a semester, all enrolled in college directly out of high school and none of them had a high school GPA of less than 3.25.

All of the out-of-state students were living on campus. Laura was an 18 year old who felt her dorm was like a "prison." She enrolled full-time but was undecided about her major. She made new friends during her first semester, and planned to join some clubs spring semester. Though she didn't work fall term, money was a major factor in going to school. She was doing well in classes, and was in honors classes spring semester.

Perry also met new friends, and enjoyed events on campus and his classes during his first semester. He was willing to talk to his professors, and stated he was here to learn. He enjoyed cultural diversity and commented on the lack of it at BSU compared to Las Vegas. He was undecided about his major and was not working while attending school.

Kate was an 18-year-old who was majoring in business and minoring in French. She was getting financial aid and was not working while attending school. Despite the fact that she wanted to get away from home, she experienced substantial homesickness during the fall. She also had emotional trauma from the death of a mother figure and the serious disability of a friend from a car wreck. She liked living in the dorms and meeting other students, though she thought she might be having "too much fun" and might need to spend more time studying. However, her classes were going well and her grades were good.

Seth came from a small Idaho town to attend BSU. His parents were paying for his education, and he worked for them in return during the summers on the farm in exchange. He didn't seem to have strong motivation for an education because his career plans were to work the farm. He

hoped his classes would give him skills that could be used in the farm business. He admitted that he lacked study skills, but liked the classes. He spent a great deal of time finding fishing holes and indicated he probably should have lived in the dorm where he could have interacted with others more. His high school GPA was quite good at 3.25, but his perception was that BSU was a very large, rather impersonal institution compared to his very small community. At the end of the fall semester, he switched to the College of Applied Technology to pursue a welding degree and possibly farm management which would be more directly applicable to the farm business he would be returning to.

Rachael was also from a small rural town in Idaho. She lived off campus in an apartment with friends from her hometown. Her registration experience was confusing, and she felt that the process was impersonal. She thought the departments were unorganized, and didn't have the information she had sent. Spring registration went better for her, as she was able to talk to an advisor and get her class goals set for future semesters. She didn't have a lot of social time because she worked part time, but met a few new friends. She had not talked to her professors, even though her classes were harder than she expected. She indicated that she enjoyed her classes and school, but perhaps did not feel totally comfortable on campus.

Teresa was a 18-year-old female from Central Idaho. She was living off campus with friends from her home town and working part time. Her perception of the institution initially was very negative. She had negative comments about almost every department, staff, class, professors, and facilities. This student viewed herself as a high achiever, thought every class was too elementary, and did not feel she received the treatment she deserved. She had gone from being the salutatorian of her small high school to one of several thousand in the college freshmen class. She continued to perform well academically, attaining GPAs of 3.76 and 3.69 for the fall and spring semesters at BSU. When contacted during the spring term as a follow-up, her attitude had changed considerably and she was then very pleased with her college experiences.

Jake was an 18 year old from southern Idaho, the only one of the four out-of-town Idahoans who lived on campus. He came to learn from specific faculty members in his major, music. He had a negative first impression based on registration processes, but was impressed with his professors

and "loved the university." During his first semester, he met new friends, joined clubs and the marching band, and was enjoying school. He attended full-time and was not initially working.

Local residents who enrolled at BSU

The six students who were already living locally were more diverse in terms of age and background than the out-of-towners. The two women in the group (Stephanie and Angie) were somewhat older than the traditional freshman and had young children to care for. Angie had two small children and was living with her mother who was helping her to put her life back in order. After earning a GED she enrolled in college and had a GPA above 3.0 for both semesters. She was active in a campus club and was elected president shortly after joining. She was using AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and federal loans to complete her education.

Stephanie was a 24 year old female, married, with a small child. She attended classes off campus at Mountain Home Air Force Base. Her 4.0 GPA for both fall and spring semesters was quite a contrast to her high school GPA of 2.46. She appeared motivated to get a degree, had support from her husband, and had a declared major. She had a built- in peer group with all the other students living on the Base. Talking to the faculty was not been as productive as she would have liked, and she planned to attend some classes at the BSU campus for more interaction and better facilities. She felt she learned a lot the first semester, was looking forward to new classes, and showed the maturity necessary to be persistent.

Of the four men who lived locally, three (Mike, Rod, and Gordon) were aged 18-20 and lived with their parents. Mike was a 20-year-old male living at home with his parents who were anxious for him to go to college because they never went. He found the campus and classes better than he expected. He thought it was a sacrifice for him to go to college because he wasn't working full-time so he couldn't "purchase all the stuff he wanted" but was looking to the long term when he'd get a better job.

Rod was an 18-year-old from Boise, who also was living with his parents. He was not very interested initially in going to college, but after attending, he became excited. He said his family told him to "go to school or die." He joined the debate team and really liked his professors. He

enjoyed learning from all students, all cultures, especially the non-traditional students. He attended full-time while working about 30 hours per week on campus.

Gordon planned to live at home with his parents through the four years of college. He had two scholarships and also worked to pay for his education, already having saved enough money for his sophomore year. His current job consisted of night-loading freight so he only got five hours of sleep per night before pedaling his bike for 20 minutes to campus. He wanted to get a degree so he wouldn't have to work at labor-intensive jobs. He liked going to classes, felt comfortable with his professors, and enjoyed learning.

Jim was an exceptional story. As a young Mexican, he quit school in the ninth grade. He later obtained his GED through BSU and then enrolled as an undergraduate in his mid-20s. He showed a strong psychological readiness for college and a love of learning. He was in school not only to get a degree to better himself, but more importantly to learn. His major was physics, and he had several catch up math classes to take before he could begin his major course work. His wife had her degree and was the major wage earner while he went to school (though he worked, too). He felt comfortable with the campus, had joined social groups, and had a faculty mentor. He had received an anonymous scholarship which bothered him because he couldn't thank the individual personally.

Students who were still here but at risk

Of the four students in this group, three (Nicole, Laurel, and Sara) had GPAs above 2.0 the first semester, but which dropped below 2.0 the spring semester. The other student, Carl, pulled up his GPA from 1.33 to 2.94 in the spring. All were in the 18-20 age range. Two were local residents and two moved to Boise to attend BSU.

Carl was 20 years old. He lived at home with parents, and his grandparents were paying for his education. Based on conversations during the semester, Carl was expected to perform fairly well since he reported all of his courses were going well except English, where he couldn't understand what he needed to do to improve his papers and felt stymied in approaching his teacher because of prior inconsistent feedback and the "D" grade on his paper. He enjoyed the change from his

high school environment and considered his classes fun and challenging. He planned to major in engineering and his employer was supportive of switching his schedule around his classes to work 20 hours per week.

One foreign student, Nicole, was coping with homesickness and poor English skills. Yet she, more than any other student in the group, worked to ensure she was academically and socially integrated into the campus. She personally introduced herself to her professors and discussed her difficulties with English. She joined several clubs, including the Spanish Club, and won a pool tournament. Though she liked to socialize, her journals indicate that she kept a daily and weekly schedule that provided time to study, clean, and attend mass without fail. With a goal of graduating and living in Boise, she is expected to have a difficult time but to endure and ultimately succeed.

Sara came from a small town in Nevada. She felt a strong responsibility as the first grandchild on both sides of the family to go to college and also as a local scholarship recipient. She indicated that her high school teachers had called her at BSU to encourage her. She was quite homesick her first semester, and said she was on an "emotional roller coaster" while at school. She said she was "testing school out", and described college as "war", where she was just "trying to survive." She had grandparents who got ill during fall semester, and she didn't make many friends her first semester. Though she had to work really hard to get Bs in her classes and money was very tight for her, she is also expected to succeed.

Laurel was the third student whose GPA dropped below 2.0 during the spring. She was living with her parents and working part-time. She appeared to be attending college because "both parents are forceful about it." Perhaps as a result, she didn't like her classes and indicated they had her doing "stupid things." She said it was hard because she really doesn't like school. If her grades continue to fall, she will be able to withdraw from school despite her parents' desire that she continue.

As a follow-up, enrollment status of these four students was checked over the summer. All four remained enrolled through Spring 1998 with GPAs above 2.0. Also, all were pre-registered for Fall 1998 except for Laurel.

Students who were academically successful but still left

Only one student fell into this category. Don was a 19-year-old male living at home with his parents. His father attended college. Despite semester grade point averages of 2.86 and 2.61, it appeared that this student never really committed to college. He took off during hunting season and postponed a job search until after that time, despite the fact that the money was needed to pay his tuition. He deliberately chose easy classes, but they were harder than he expected and not very interesting to him. He was unhappy when faculty told him to seek the answer himself and complained that the university was close-minded and one-sided in its views about feminism and religion/creationism. He described the process of paying for his classes as "painful" because it was so expensive. He had selected a major that required him to transfer to the University of Idaho to complete his degree, but planned to spend two years at BSU first. Though he stayed for the first two semesters, he did not return for either the fall 1997 or spring 1998 semesters for what would have been his sophomore year. Perhaps Don transferred to the University of Idaho early. Perhaps he decided college was not for him at this stage of his life.

Summary

Following 25 students across a semester, talking to them weekly, and reading their journals put a face on the freshman class. Our students ranged from young to middle-aged. They came focused on a goal or not even sure they wanted to be here. They loved it and they hated it. They played and they worked. Yet when trying to categorize them in order to better describe who succeeded and who didn't, a "one-size-fits-all" answer couldn't be found.

Most of the first students to fall by the wayside were local residents. The earliest leavers were three women with children, none of whom even completed the first semester. Yet two other women with children were among the top achievers in the group. The difference appeared to be the supportive environment which the successful women had from either their mother or husband compared to a more "go it alone" approach of the other three.

Generally, too, students who came from out of town—who made a commitment and left their families were more likely to persevere and succeed, especially if they stayed in the dorm. Young students just out of high school who stayed with their parents to go to college were at greater risk, though there were a number of cases of local young men who were doing well at the university.

With few exceptions, traditional students who received little or no family support (economic and emotional) were just as successful as those students whose families provided a great deal of support. And in fact, some students preferred their parents stay in the background. These students found that being away from home offered them the chance to develop their problem-solving skills and become more financially and emotionally independent. They were homesick at times, but they recognized that too much family intervention could be detrimental.

In the few cases where parents took over control of their children's academic lives, this was not a good sign. These parents acted as buffers and often dealt with problems in the financial aid office, with registration processes, with instructors, and with problems in the dorms, all on behalf of the student. These students tended to be less successful, seemingly because they did not take an active role in their own education.

For traditional students, moving away from home to attend college was akin to a four-year sleep over with ten of your best new friends. Students completing the journals who lived in the dorms often found the experience liberating and spent a great deal of time with friends, drinking and socializing until the wee hours of the morning. However, in general, the freedom of life in the dorms did not have a negative effect on students. Successful students, although they may have spent a good deal of time away from the books, found ways to create structure in an often chaotic environment. They set aside specific times during the week to study, attended religious services regularly, and made housekeeping a scheduled chore. This structure provided the discipline these students needed to succeed in college.

Students who lived on campus and were able to create a "home-like" atmosphere fared better than those students who did not. These students living in the dorms were often frightened by the

prospect of life on their own. They expressed exhilaration at being able to stay out as late as they wanted, at not being told to clean their rooms, at eating whatever whenever, and at doing their homework whenever they saw fit. Yet many were also homesick and found it difficult to make decisions on their own. They called their parents frequently and had packages of mother's cooking mailed to their dorms. Yet most managed to find contentment with living an on-campus life. These successful students often incorporated familiar rituals into their daily routines to help them make the emotional adjustment. They hung family pictures, they rented their favorite family videos. They brought blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals from home to spruce up their rooms. They found surrogate families to spend time with and formed close-knit social groups of friends from home or near home.

However, those students who spent a great deal of time in their dorm rooms and who did little to create a home-like atmosphere were often less satisfied with their first term experience. These students were often lonely and expressed feelings of isolation. They made frequent trips home and were relatively unhappy once they returned to the university. However, students who lived in the dorms were no more or less successful than students who lived off campus.

Students who participated in campus activities and joined on-campus clubs and organizations were more likely to be successful. These students often felt they were an important part of the university community and a member of a large and diverse academic family. They were often proud of their newfound positions within this community and felt a responsibility towards other students. In contrast, students who did not participate in campus activities nor join clubs and organizations, especially those of traditional college age, often expressed feelings of isolation. These students generally lived off-campus and found it difficult to return to campus once classes were over. They made few new friends and felt powerless to affect change. They often saw the university as an institution, a sterile structure with little life.

Overall, and in sharp contrast to traditional students, non-traditional students, whether married or single, thrived in a supportive family environment. Students who were married and had young children were more successful than single parent students. Married students whose spouses or parents were willing to take on the added responsibility of helping with child rearing and of

providing additional economic support faired better than those students who had to go it alone. In fact, only one single parent survived the first semester, the other three dropped out shortly after the fall term began. The surviving single parent did not work and received federal aid. She lived with her mother who was available to provide after-hours day care and additional economic support.

For non-traditional and traditional students alike, guilt was a factor in student success. Although there were few students who succeeded or failed solely because of guilt, most expressed strong feelings on the subject. Many of these students were non-traditional. They had gone from being sole bread-winner or caretaker to being a "economic burden" to their spouses and parents. They felt they had little time to give their families and that they were being selfish by choosing to go to college rather than working full-time and taking care of the needs of their families. These students struggled with guilt on a daily basis and even though most had supportive families, they were still plagued by these feelings.

Some traditional students also dealt with guilt. These students were often relying on family for at least some economic support. Their families were often lower middle class and these students felt they were literally taking the bread from their parents and siblings' mouths. Some felt a degree was perhaps frivolous under the circumstances, and they spent a fair amount of time attempting to justify the cost. Many of these students worked in hopes of becoming financially independent of their families while they worked towards their degrees.

In this study, eight were gone and 17 remained after one year. The most obvious predictor of who would fall in which group was first semester GPA. Of the eight leavers, seven had GPAs below 2.0. However, GPA was surely reflective of discontinued effort as much as failure despite best efforts in the classroom. Half of the non-successful students didn't even complete their first semester, indicating that waiting until the end of the first semester to identify at-risk students is too late for many. One possible early warning signal could be performance in English, a course which most freshmen take their first semester. A number of early leavers specifically mentioned difficulties and frustrations with their English classes.

Good prior academic performance in high school did not necessarily predict success in college either, though high school GPA has served as the number one predictor of college performance in both national and local studies. The seven students who dropped out of school had high school GPAs between 2.46 and 3.23, while one had a GED. Conversely, the thirteen who were successful had high school GPAs which ranged from 2.46 to 3.94, with two others having a GED. This lack of correspondence between high school GPA and college success is probably due to the number of non-traditional students included in the study. Most studies have been based on students just out of high school. In addition, this study allowed a closer look at the role of motivation that lies behind academic performance.

Though elusive and hard to pin down in many ways, interviews and journals revealed that unless new students latched onto the "culture of learning", unless they began to enjoy their classes and the learning process, they would soon be gone. Students who were simply "going through the motions" couldn't keep it up. Our freshmen generally found that college was hard work and they needed to love what they did.

The decision to go to college is never an easy one to make. A campus can be like a foreign country to many. However, for students who are determined to attain a degree, there is very little that can deter them. Yet there are students who simply do not want to attend college. For whatever reason, they have decided that it is better to wait. They are often forced into enrolling by well-meaning family members, but had they been given a choice, they would be anywhere but here. This may be one reason that local residents were more at risk of leaving. The very act of moving to Boise to enroll requires a level of action and commitment far beyond that of a local student who leaves the house and drives 15 minutes to campus after Mom has sent in the application and enrolled the student for first semester classes. Retention efforts cannot save students who truly don't want to be here. They must be ready and willing to move on in their education and no amount of university support can alter that fact.

For our group of 25, the retention rate was 68%, considerably higher than the 55-58% seen for freshmen as a whole. While the increased retention rate may be an artifact of the small sample size, it is also possible that participation in the study improved the chances for success. We agreed at the start of the study that if students asked for help, we would direct them to it as best

we could. We also simply listened to their frustrations and complaints. Perhaps serving as the "ear" of the university was enough to keep some marginal students plugging along until things got better. Several certainly voiced their appreciation that the university would take the time to conduct the study and listen to them. Though we will never really know if that was the case in this study, providing students with a sense that they are seen as individuals even though the university is large may be one key to improving student success.

This study demonstrated that our freshmen class is very diverse. Students who were already living in Boise and enrolled at BSU had a different set of issues and experiences than students who moved here to enroll. For traditional-aged students, a key variable seemed to be the maturity to direct their own lives and the desire to learn and get a degree. For older students, all of whom were already living here, a core of support seems vital for their continued success, especially for women. Retention efforts should probably be further diversified to address the different needs expressed by traditional and non-traditional students.